

[051] In one embodiment consistent with the principles of the present invention, the sender is notified of actual delivery using an image of the physical item as delivered. The image can show the new recipient-instructed delivery point on the address label and the physical condition (e.g., any damage) of mail item 100. The image may be provided electronically, for example, in JPEG format. It may be emailed to the sender, or put on a website with the URL emailed to the sender. Although images may require a very large amount of bandwidth and storage space, especially considering that millions of letters and parcels are delivered by the U.S. Postal Service every day, and that a parcel with a surface area of 10 x 20 inches would require about two megabytes to store as an image. However, techniques known to those of ordinary skill in the art, such as data compression, reduces the required resources, especially since not all senders will want, or pay for, image notification. After the sender is notified of actual delivery, the process ends.

[052] If mail item 100 is not deliverable in stage 245, then in stage 260 a notification is sent, e.g., to the sender, to indicate that mail item 100 was undeliverable and disposition instructions are requested. As with stages 215, 225, and 250, notifying and requesting can be done in several different ways, all consistent with the principles of the present invention. In addition, the undeliverable notification may be sent to a wide variety of individuals or organizations consistent with the principles of the present invention.

[053] For example, as noted, the undeliverable notification may be sent to the sender. The sender can then provide a number of different disposition instructions to the shipping service in possession of the undeliverable item. For

example, the sender may instruct the shipper to return mail item 100 to a return address printed on mail item 100, a return address associated with mail item 100 in a database, or a newly supplied return address. Alternatively, the sender may instruct the shipper to destroy mail item 100, auction it off, or donate it to a charity. A shipper may prefer these options to returning mail item 100 because in some cases when mail item 100 is undeliverable, it is cheaper not to return it. For example, consider an undeliverable \$2.00 bottle opener. It may cost the sender \$5.00 in handling and labor charges to accept the return, process it, and put the opener back in the inventory. In such a case, the sender may not want mail item 100 back. Instead they may simple want it destroyed, or auctioned off to recoup a share of the proceeds, or donated to charity to receive a tax benefit.

[054] After disposition of mail item 100 is completed, a notification may be sent, e.g., to the sender, to indicate disposition of mail item 100 (stage 265). As with stages 215, 225, 260 and 265, notification may be sent to a wide variety of individuals or organizations and may be done in several different ways, all consistent with the principles of the present invention. At the completion of this stage, the process ends.

[055] One skilled in the art will recognize that various stages of the process described can be modified, removed, and/or reordered without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. For example, stages 225, 230, and 240 may be removed and the resulting process will still comport with the principles of the present invention.

[056] Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. For example, one skilled in the art would realize that the principles of the present invention encompass delivery services that implement the described invention completely manually, using an integrated manual/automatic process or a completely automatic process including a manual/automatic inspection, computerized databases or, paper databases, and manual phone calls. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with a true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.

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